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ABSTRACT

The General Educational Development (GED) testing program has been a part of the Alberta High School Equivalency Program since 1981. Between December 1981 and December 1983, 4,333 applicants passed the GED in Alberta, and 802 applicants failed to pass the test. Random samples of 200 individuals from each of these groups were studied to determine whether there are any consistent differences between members of the two groups. Usable questionnaires were returned by 46 percent of the GED-fail group and 67 percent of the GED-pass group. The characteristics of the Alberta GED student population were found to be quite similar to those of other equivalency program student populations. The older students tended to seek a GED certificate because they deemed it personally rewarding, whereas younger enrollees generally saw the GED as a way of gaining a better job. Those in the GED-fail group were likely to be younger, have lower levels of formal education, and be unemployed than were their counterparts in the GED-pass group. A second part of the study assessed the acceptance of the GED by Alberta postsecondary institutions. This was accomplished by a survey of registrars from 19 Alberta universities, colleges, and technical institutes. Evidence from the survey suggests that while the GED program has benefited a small number of persons who have participated in it, the magnitude of the benefit is difficult to ascertain. There was, however, some indication that additional program participants may benefit in the future as a number of postsecondary institutions seemed interested in establishing policies concerning the Alberta GED program. (MN)

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Alberta GED Candidates: Program Perceptions, Benefits, and Test Performance

Barry C. Carbol

Introduction

The GED tests were introduced in Alberta in 1981, following several years of debate among provincial educational authorities. The GED Testing Program is part of a larger program designed for adults who have not acquired a high school diploma. This program, called the Alberta High School Equivalency Program (AHSEP), provides applicants with two ways of acquiring an equivalency diploma: the assessment of a variety of educationally relevant personal factors or the writing of the GED tests. The study which forms the basis of this brief was undertaken to describe and evaluate the AHSEP with a view to assisting the Alberta government departments responsible for the program (Alberta Education and Alberta Advanced Education) with future decision-making and policy planning relative to adult education.

The evaluation approach adopted for the study borrowed heavily from the work of Rossi and Freeman (1982). Their approach was selected from a number of possible approaches because it is concerned with the evaluation of social programs. The GED Testing Program was considered a social program because participants may derive benefits that relate to their status or functioning in society.

Evaluation questions related to the design, on-going operation, and utility of the program were raised. The questions addressed in this brief are:

1. What are the characteristics of the Alberta GED candidates?
2. Are there any differences between those who pass the tests and those who fail?
3. To what extent are GED graduates treated as equivalent to regular high school graduates by Alberta employers and postsecondary institutions?
4. What benefits have GED graduates received according to Alberta employers and postsecondary institutions?

Barry C. Carbol, Director, Student Assessment, British Columbia Ministry of Education. Note: This Brief represents part of a Ph. D. dissertation study undertaken by this author at the University of Alberta. The title of the study is "An Evaluation of the Alberta High School Equivalency Program." Readers are encouraged to refer to Carbol, B. C., Maguire, T. O. (1986), "Benefits and disappointments from participation in the Alberta High School Equivalency Program," *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 32(1), 66-76, for specific information about the statistical tests used in this research.

Related Studies

Evaluation studies of high school equivalency programs have reported widespread acceptance of equivalency credentials in the United States by post-secondary institutions (Whitney, 1982), the military (Laurence, 1983), and employers (Malizio & Whitney, 1985).

Studies of high school equivalency programs in Canada have largely been carried out by sponsoring government agencies and have shown mixed results when compared with those conducted in the United States. However, Canadian GED candidates, like their American counterparts, view the GED tests as a way of increasing their job and promotion opportunities, and report improved self-image as the greatest program benefit (Manitoba Department of Education, 1982; Jantzen & Quigley, 1982).

Method

Between December 1981 and December 1983, 4333 applicants passed the GED tests in Alberta; 802 applicants did not pass the tests. From both of these groups (designated here as GED-pass, and GED-fail) random samples of 200 were selected from lists provided by Alberta Education. Following a field trial of questionnaire items involving eight program applicants, a survey instrument was developed. This instrument asked questions related to the educational, vocational, and background characteristics of the applicants, the reasons applicants applied to the program, and the educational and employment benefits applicants anticipated and realized.

In May and June 1984, questionnaires were mailed to the individuals selected for study, with a personalized covering letter and a stamped, addressed, return envelope. A reminder letter was mailed one month later to the non-respondents. Of 400 questionnaires mailed, 65 or 16% could not be delivered. Return rates were markedly different for the two groups. Only 46% of the GED-fail group returned the questionnaire while 67% of the GED-pass group complied with the request. Nonetheless, these return rates compare favorably with that of Cervero and Peterson (1982) who reported a rate for their survey of 24%.

Acceptance of the GED by Alberta post-secondary institutions was assessed through a survey of registrars from 19 Alberta universities, colleges, and technical institutes. Of particular interest were institutional policies regarding the admission of adults having high school equivalency diplomas.

Personnel officers representing a stratified sample of 12 Alberta employers who engage large numbers of employees were interviewed to determine their views concerning the value of the equivalency credential. It was felt that employers with large firms would be more likely to have come into contact with individuals who had taken the GED and thus would have more informed opinions about the program and its graduates.

The organizations who agreed to participate in the study employed more than 60,000 workers (approximately 5% of the Alberta work force) and represented a wide range of occupational categories (manufacturing, construction, transportation, retail trade, finance, personal service, public administration).

Results

Characteristics and Perceptions of Alberta GED Candidates

Background characteristics

Sex, grade, and highest grade summaries for the Alberta GED candidates are reported in Table 1.

TABLE 1

BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS
OF ALBERTA GED CANDIDATES

Characteristic	GED-pass (n = 113)	GED-fail (n = 77)
Gender		
Percentage Male	46.9	48.9
Percentage Female	53.1	53.2
Mean age in years	32.7	28.3
Mean highest grade completed	10.0	9.8

It is interesting to note that the GED-fail group was significantly younger ($p < .05$) than the GED-pass group. This finding suggested that individuals who had most recently left school were less successful in terms of the GED experience.

In general, the Alberta GED candidates resemble individuals who have participated in GED programs in other provinces and states. For example, the mean grade level completed by the Alberta sample was found to be grade 10, a level widely reported in the literature for different GED populations (Moore, 1982; Malizio & Whitney, 1981; Swarm, 1981).

Reasons for applying to the program

Most applicants applied to the Alberta GED program to improve their educational opportunities or to improve their chances of getting a better job. These findings are similar to those reported elsewhere (Cervero & Peterson, 1982; Jantzen & Quigley, 1982; Malizio & Whitney, 1981; Swarm, 1981).

It was not possible to distinguish applicants' responses to questions dealing with their reasons for applying to the program based upon the highest grade they had completed. The age of the applicants, however, was related to the reasons given for applying to the program. In general, younger applicants were more interested in job and educational opportunities while older applicants were

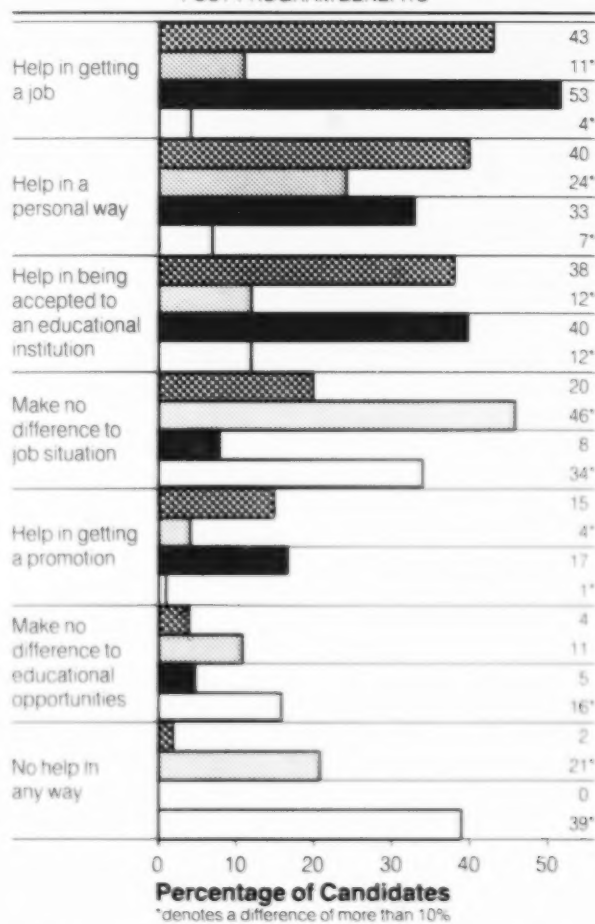
participating to a greater extent for personal reasons. Divergent findings concerning the reasons that people of various age groups give for wanting to have a high school equivalency diploma were not unexpected, Harvey (1978), Russ-Eft and Steel (1980), and Cross (1981) have all found differential motivation in adult education programs to be a function of age.

Expectations and benefits

Discrepancies between expectations and benefits were found for both the GED-pass and GED-fail groups. This finding is consistent with similar findings reported in the literature (Cervero & Peterson, 1982; Malizio & Whitney, 1981; Jantzen & Quigley, 1982; Swarm, 1981). Figure 1 suggests that participants were disappointed in the benefits of the program, expecting much more than they actually received. The trends of disappointment conveyed in the figure, even though based on "prior expectations" which were assessed after the fact, seem undeniable.

FIGURE 1

A COMPARISON OF PRIOR EXPECTATIONS AND
POST-PROGRAM BENEFITS



LEGEND

Prior expectations: GED-pass = GED-fail = GED-pass n = 113
Post-program benefits: GED-pass = GED-fail = GED-fail n = 77

To check out these trends, respondents were asked if they had participated either full-time or part-time in an educational program since their GED experience. Twenty percent of the GED-pass group and 14% of the GED-fail group had received or were receiving further education. Fewer than 35% in both groups had even applied for admission to some kind of training program.

Employment patterns for the two groups were also determined through the questionnaires. Both groups experienced slight increases in paid employment after participating in the program. Unlike the Behal (1983) study in which high levels of unemployment were reported for all GED candidates, the present study found only the GED-fail group to have an unusually high level of unemployment. The responses on employment are found in Table 2.

TABLE 2

EMPLOYMENT BEFORE AND AFTER THE GED PROGRAM

	Pass		Fail	
	Before	After	Before	After
Employed full-time	53%	58%	36%	43%
Employed part-time	13%	12%	12%	8%
Not looking for work	8%	3%	16%	7%
Looking for work	16%	15%	23%	33%
Other	10%	12%	13%	9%

If only the unemployed who sought work are considered, the GED-fail group has an unemployment rate that is over twice as great as the GED-pass group. Moreover, when prior and post comparisons of employment status are made, the GED-fail group showed an increase in the percentage of those unemployed but looking for work. Such a prior-post finding for the GED-fail group is not surprising for at least two reasons. First, the GED-fail group tended to be younger than the GED-pass group and unemployment rates have traditionally been highest among young people. Second, general levels of unemployment in Alberta rose from 4.5% in December 1981 to 11.1% in December 1983, the period covered by the study (source: Statistics Canada).

Levels of unemployment for the GED-pass group declined slightly. Thus, at a time when Alberta unemployment levels were generally increasing, the unemployment rates of some GED program participants actually dropped. It may be that acquiring an equivalency diploma helped some individuals to find new employment. It is also possible that the shifts in employment data for the GED-pass group may reflect a more general motivational factor rather than a causal factor.

Personal benefits outweighed educational and job-related benefits according to Alberta GED candidates. Self-satisfaction was the most frequently reported personal benefit. Positive comments concerning the GED program by even those who had failed the tests focused on personal benefits rather than educational or job-related benefits.

Acceptance of the GED Testing Program in Alberta

Survey of post-secondary institutions

Registrars from the four universities in Alberta, the three technical institutes, and 12 public and private colleges were surveyed to determine their adult admissions policies relative to the GED. Universities were found to generally not accept

the GED for admission to any programs. At the same time, they do not accept a general high school diploma as sufficient either. What is of interest is an applicant's standing in specific grade 12 academic courses. Only one university, Athabasca, does not make a distinction between a regular high school diploma and a GED diploma. Athabasca has, however, an open admissions policy which allows virtually anyone to take courses regardless of previous educational background.

Alberta public colleges and technical institutes generally accept the Alberta GED equivalency diploma for admissions purposes. Both types of institutions, however, require additional specific courses for admission to some programs.

Private colleges, aligned with Alberta universities, do not accept the GED but have special adult admissions policies which allow adults not possessing a high school diploma (and those possessing the GED diploma) to be admitted. The universities also have similar adult admissions policies.

Many of the registrars surveyed were of the opinion that their current adult admission policies were sufficient to meet the needs of Alberta GED graduates. This attitude presents a problem for GED graduates who, according to the registrars surveyed, are often lumped together with non-high school graduates in terms of admission to post-secondary programs and as a result receive the same low status as non-high school graduates. This admission situation is similar to the one reported by Laurence (1983) in her study of GED acceptance by the United States military. In fairness, however, it must be said that the GED program has a much shorter history in Alberta than elsewhere in North America and many of Alberta's post-secondary institutions have not had much experience with GED graduates.

Employer interviews

Alberta employers who participated in the study were generally unfamiliar with the Alberta equivalency program and the GED. Consequently, they were initially reluctant to accept the GED as equivalent to a regular high school diploma. After receiving some information about the GED and its purposes most employers surveyed were willing to consider the GED credential as equal in status to a regular high school diploma.

The interviews also revealed that educational qualifications are but one of several criteria considered when hiring decisions are made. Employers are generally more concerned with factors that are more directly related to the jobs they have to offer. Experience, leadership ability, communication skills, interpersonal skills, initiative, punctuality, and specific academic or vocational courses were all mentioned as being of greater value than a high school credential by the employers interviewed. Most employers did admit, however, that they require prospective applicants to possess a certain minimum level of education. In some instances this meant grade 12 graduation or beyond; in other instances it meant only grade 10.

Most of the personnel officers interviewed reported that the acquisition of the GED diploma (or regular high school diploma for that matter) would not result in an employee receiving a raise or a promotion.

Discussion and Conclusions

Given that the goals and objectives for the Alberta High School Equivalency Program are not very much different

from those of other equivalency programs, it was not surprising that the characteristics of the Alberta and other equivalency populations described in the literature were found to be similar. The reasons for applying to the equivalency program, prior expectations, and benefits reported by the Alberta GED sample were not unlike those of other equivalency programs.

It is evident that for the Alberta population those who fail the GED tests are younger, have lower levels of formal education, and are more often unemployed. Also, persons who fail the GED are most often motivated by the belief that a credential will help them to get a job or to go on to some form of post-secondary education in order to improve their job situation.

The differential relationship between age and reasons for participation in the equivalency program is an interesting one. Older individuals were motivated to acquire a GED credential because, generally, they saw it as personally rewarding. Younger candidates, on the other hand, were more pragmatic; upon completion of the program, they hoped to get a better job. This finding reinforces Cross's (1981, p. 91) contention that the reasons adults participate in education programs "correspond consistently and logically to the life situations" of those individuals. Based on the findings of the present study, more extensive investigations of the relationship of age and motivational factors to GED test performance are in order.

As in similar programs, there was a tendency on the part of GED candidates to inflate the value of the GED diploma in terms of its utility in the educational and job marketplaces. Many GED candidates saw the GED diploma as a way of overcoming all barriers in their attempts to find employment or acceptance to post-secondary education. This may be one reason why discrepancies between prior expectations and post-program benefits were found. The fact that the employment situations of the GED-pass group remained stable even at a time when unemployment was on the rise, has not tempered the disappointment in the benefits of the program for individuals in this group.

Evidence from Alberta's post-secondary institutions and a sample of Alberta employers suggests that the GED program has been of benefit to a small number who have participated in it but that the magnitude of the benefit is difficult to ascertain. There was some indication that additional program participants may benefit in the future as a number of post-secondary institutions seem interested in establishing policies concerning the Alberta GED program. The fact that possessing a GED diploma seems to have made a difference in a number of admission decisions represents a breakthrough for GED graduates.

While it may have been too early to determine the extent to which the Alberta GED program assists individuals in meeting their vocational and personal educational goals, the value of the personal benefits received by participants should not be underestimated. Psychological benefits may have assisted some of the participants in finding a new job or may have provided the impetus for others to apply to post-secondary institutions. For Alberta GED candidates, it may be that the credential itself is less important than the positive outlook created by the success in acquiring it.

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